

# DESTRUCTION & Beauty

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# INTRODUCTION

I wrote a very long book over the last year, but I think what I most want to say from it fits in a short book, after all. This is that book.

This book is entitled *Destruction and Beauty*. It is about the destruction of coercive beliefs and the suggestion of non-coercive beliefs, based in beauty.

Because this book is so short, I'll put the acknowledgments here:

Thanks, first of all, to all the educational people I've known, who have shaped me (on purpose or not, lovingly or not) to be able to see what I see. I can't name all of them, so I won't name any of them.

Thanks to the friends of my writing, through the years: Gerrit, Richard, Terje, Natalia, and Sarah.

Thanks to the artists "who have known the true gods of sound and stone and word and tint" (some of whom I'll mention later in the book). What an awful life, but how helpful to me.

# DESTRUCTION

What can we know?

What is knowledge? It is certainly a true belief. If I have a true belief, then my mind is attuned to the way things are outside it. Perhaps my mind, part of my mind, is attuned to the way things are in the rest of my mind.

But if I observe my mind, I find in it many beliefs. Which ones are true? I think I've just brought the problem up all over again. How can I know what is true?

How can I know that my way of knowing the truth is good? Is it true that "My way of knowing the truth is good"? I would have to know that my way of knowing the truth was good, in order to know anything at all. But that brings the problem up all over again. How can I know what is true?

So, some things I have to just know are true, without knowing why, or how I know they're true. Otherwise, I don't know anything. But then, why not believe everything? If I can accept one thing as true, out of nowhere, for no reason, then why not accept something else as true, out of nowhere, for no reason? How can I draw a line between things?

The preceding could be called "epistemology", the branch of knowledge that attempts to understand knowledge itself,

the practice of examining knowledge, the subject “knowledge”.

Descartes said “I think, therefore I am”, and this is how he found something he couldn’t doubt. I agree with Descartes. I think that since I think, I can’t doubt that I am. I can’t imagine otherwise. But people have questioned Descartes. I don’t understand how they do it, but they see otherwise than I do, and than Descartes did. So, just because I can’t imagine otherwise, I can’t assume that I’m right. It could just be a failure of my imagination.

Kant said something like, “the thing-in-itself can never be known, we can only see appearances”. Reality could be completely otherwise than what is intelligible to human beings.

I’ve thought about solipsism. Maybe the whole universe is just my consciousness, plus a subconscious that says things that might surprise me. How could I prove otherwise?

But someone might then say, “OK, Descartes and Kant said what they said, and you’ve said what you’ve said, but what practical difference does it make?”

This is a persuasive counter-argument.

Does epistemology matter when I play racquetball? No.

Does epistemology matter when I talk to someone?

Sometimes, but often enough, no. Does epistemology matter when I’m happy about something that happened to me? No. Does epistemology matter when I pray? No -- only

when I wish I could pray. Does epistemology matter when I'm in love? Sometimes, but often enough, no. Does epistemology matter when I breathe? No.

If epistemology doesn't help me live my life better, then I can just forget about it, right? But then I still need to know how to know things. I think what often happens is that I forget to question certain foundational beliefs, beliefs which I don't question, and then from these I go on to live my life, until there's some kind of problem.

This idea is beautiful and very persuasive. It shuts me up inside, calms and soothes me.

However, why should I think this has anything to do with reality? Why should my own goals, my own desires and trustings, have anything to do with what is?

Just because something is beautifully persuasive, doesn't mean it's true.

But it could be true. There could be some essential connection between what is beautiful and useful and what is true. Maybe the universe is person-centered. Maybe reality is person-centered.

But how could I know that that is true?

I live in different contexts. I've been a few different things in my life. Sometimes I live in the context of economics, politics and systems. There's a certain feel to that. I could recommend books or blogs that take me there. Sometimes I live in the context of philosophy (in which place I find

epistemology), other times in the context of my religious faith. Sometimes I am in the context of being a 29 year old, hanging out with my friends in the city. Sometimes I am in the context of someone trying to make money.

Is it the case that the context of philosophy is the one in which we come to know truths that apply (though it might seem otherwise) in all the other contexts? Or is philosophy (thus, epistemology), only true in its own context, or in some selection of contexts?

If reality is person-centered, then each of the contexts is held together by a personal being. Somehow, in my case, though each context seems to have a past and a future all its own, they are held together in my life, and I experience numerous different ones of them, and (though each has its own distinct past and future life, each tells my life story reaching from the farthest past to the never-ending future), I go from one to another. And then epistemology becomes a footnote to the whole.

What is actually true in every context is then something other than philosophy. Can we say what that acontextual truth is? Maybe. If we could express it adequately in words, then we could enter into philosophy about it. But epistemology would still apply. Epistemology doesn't go away. So we have to deny philosophy, deny textual thinking, at some point.

When I speak to a person, there are the assumptions, feelings, impressions which are spoken textually, conveyed in words, in text, out loud, explicitly; and there are those

assumptions, feelings, impressions, which are unspoken, conveyed “between the lines” of words, in subtext, or non-verbally, implicitly. The subtextual world is powerful, and can sometimes be brought into text, and sometimes cannot, can sometimes be half-seen, and sometimes operates completely beyond our awareness. Reasoning dissolves boundaries, always asking “why not?” But what is subtextual is immune to textual reasoning. And this is how we do not fall prey to epistemology.

Is there something wrong with falling prey to epistemology?

Maybe not. I don’t know that I could prove otherwise.

If I speak to people who are fully committed to textual reasoning, then I speak to people who have gone into a complete destruction of all knowledge. These people are agnostics. What is left, except to make suggestions, and to paint pictures with words? If I speak to people who reserve some part of themselves to subtext, who affirm this as valid (implicitly, where it counts, or explicitly, where it is less essential), then I can try to prove a point, but it is just as well that I say what is beautiful.

**BEAUTY**



# SINGLENESS

I was born single, and I think I'll die single.

Some people say “everyone dies alone”, and mean that as a saying of horror. But I think that there's something beautiful about that. I think that death is an offering. I offer myself to God. When I die, I finally let go. Death is the completion of trust.

And then what happens? I don't know. If I knew, I wouldn't be letting go. I have my thoughts about this, about a God who would, and will, resurrect me, but I do not think these thoughts in every context.

I am romantically unattached. I was born that way, and I think I'll die that way. If the saying is “everyone dies alone”, then it could also be “everyone can live alone”. Dying alone and living alone are parallel. It's just you. I like having empty pockets.

I realized at some point that neither promiscuity, marriage, nor celibacy came easy to me. Some people don't seem to have a choice, but I do. Because I have a choice, it's hard. But then I am free to choose what is most beautiful to me. So I have chosen to be celibate.

A number of years ago (5 years ago), I read a book on choosing (Sheena Iyengar's book *The Art of Choosing*) and

did an exercise in it, and from that realized that my priorities were not to have a family. That was part of my decision.

That same year, I read a book about decision-making (Garry Friesen's book *Decision Making and the Will of God*) and the author drew my attention to what the Bible says about romance. Jesus suggests, to those who can, to be celibate. It seemed beautiful to me to follow that.

Celibacy can be brutal, can produce as much heartache as dating. All of this has taken something out of me. Beauty attracts us as an image and is dangerous, can be a horror. There's something in us that is disturbing, called out by beauty. My reality has been a horror reality. But yet when the image of something, the image of celibacy as much as the image of a person, is taken down, broken; or maybe the better image is, "hip-touched" (like Jacob wrestling with God<sup>1</sup>), or better put, when we pay more than we were willing to pay for something; the beauty can still remain. And now, the thing that had to be changed, me or you, has changed, but what is beautiful and valuable can remain as it always was, and we will always have its beauty.

# SUSTAINABILITY

Someday, before this world is rolled up like a map and put away, and we are taken to the next, we may arrive at sustainability.

We might destroy ourselves, but if we keep living, eventually we will reach sustainability.

What will that day look like? We have some clues by looking at the cultures of humans who have achieved sustainability before us. There are people who have adapted to living in the same areas for thousands of years. There were many of these cultures, especially in North and South America, Africa, the Pacific Islands and in Australia, before modern Europeans brought their “guns, germs, and steel” to the rest of the world, along with their infectious culture (including a kind of Christianity, an infectious leaven). Many of these cultures have passed away, but there are records of them, and the way their societies functioned.

There can be different sustainabilities, just as there can be different maturities. Someone can settle into one adult self, but if they were raised differently, perhaps into another.

Modern culture is an immaturity, an adolescence or young adulthood. But around the age of 30 (for many people), it can be said that adulthood is reached, for better or worse.

I read a book called *Millennium: Tribal Wisdom and the Modern World*. The author, an anthropologist who worked in

Brazil, saw something like this happen:

The tribe held log races. They would divide the tribe into two teams. Then they would cut a large but not too large log off of a palm tree. The log would be heavy enough for one person to carry for a while with some difficulty.

The teams would run, with people on each team coming up to relieve their teammates of the log, a kind of relay race. Then, one team would reach the village first, and be victorious. There would be speeches (these people love to make speeches).

One time, the anthropologist saw the tribe cutting obviously unequal logs. He questioned why this was done, but it was done.

The two teams set out to run. As one could expect, the team with the heavier log fell behind. But then, something happened which surprised the anthropologist. Runners from the lighter-log team came over to help the team that was carrying the heavier log! And the heavier log caught up, and the two teams were very close.

There was a great deal of excitement in the village. The race was very close, and one of the teams barely won. Very enthusiastic speeches were given.

Will something like this happen, in our sustainable future? I don't know, but I hope for something as beautiful as that.

# THE BIBLE

I grew up in a Christian family, and have read many of the books of the Bible many times. I went through a journey of trying to understand how the Bible made sense.

I found a book that made the Bible make sense to me. But then after I read that book, I was trying to figure out what was really true. How can the Bible be true? It seems like it's not corroborated by other evidence, sometimes.

Do people believe the Bible because it has been proven to be true, corroborated by all the evidence? I think some people do. They think that in fact, the real evidence suggests that the Bible really is 100% literally true.

Many people say otherwise. I find what they say appealing, but then, I do not know.

People tell of times when, simply explaining the Gospel story to someone, the other person immediately knew it was true and changed their lives. There was no rigorous knowing going on. They just knew. There was something "subtextual" going on, I guess.

So what do I think the Bible says? There are many denominations, which each say different things, but this is what I have come to.

God created the universe. People sinned, and because of that, life had to be hard. God chose a people group to work with primarily, but that didn't work out. God sent his son, Jesus, who accurately represented God to the world, and Jesus was killed by the people he was sent to. Then people who were inspired by Jesus told people about him. And then they made a prophecy: some years in the future, Jesus would return to earth. The world as we know it would end, and then those of us who hadn't completely hardened ourselves to God's voice would be resurrected to a new life. Some of us would be completely in tune with God, and would work as God's agents to instruct and encourage everyone else.

Eventually, everyone would become holy, in tune with God, and then we would all join God forever.

The Bible says other things. It talks about the nature of God.

God created the universe and is in control of physical reality. God is also emotional and is affected by our dissonances with him and with each other. God is more emotional than I am, more caring than I am. God is more responsible than I am. God doesn't always get what he wants. God can make all things work out in the end, and yet some people die because they can't come into tune with him, they choose not to. God doesn't want that to happen, but it happens. God seems to talk to Satan, a being who seeks to tempt God by saying that we're not worth loving, and tempts us in many different ways.

Reality is not all about beauty. Reality is also about evil, and about persons. Evil says "wake up from your beautiful dream" and to deal with evil then becomes beautiful, because we forget beauty. What is most beautiful is to be a

person, and what makes a person beautiful is them, in who they are. If reality is person-centered, this makes sense. To transcend beauty is the most beautiful thing, because then we are left with real persons.

But God, in his particularity, has some preferences that we might not understand. He doesn't want us to drink blood, or to engage in what could be called, in general, sexual immorality. I know that there is a tribe in East Africa that used to live off of blood and milk.<sup>2</sup> How could we tell these people not to do that? There are many people in the West who practice sexual immorality. How can we tell these people not to do that? Do we know for certain that we really understand the Bible on this point?

To understand the Bible is beyond me. But when I read it last (I read the whole thing over the last year), it seemed to me that I could obey the commands to not commit sexual immorality or drink blood, at least, that I could make those goals of mine.

I think that when the world ends, we will get our answers. In the meantime, we have a lot of choices. These choices are hard to make, but they allow us to go to where we find beauty. If the choice were too easy, we would be stuck with whatever made "perfect sense". Choosing allows us to exercise our hearts.

The Bible is both attractive and repulsive. It is attractive in ways that God is attractive, and repulsive in ways that God is repulsive. So, I should say that God is both attractive and

repulsive. Yet the greatest beauty comes from loving real people, who are both attractive and repulsive. There is a deeper attraction, in me, to that.

Do I know that the Bible is true, that God is as described in the Bible? I can't explain it all textually, which is to say, no, I don't know any of that, if I expose it to epistemology. But the message speaks to me, and so that's how I live. And of all the things which exist, to me, in every context, God is among them, and I think in a subtextual way, what I mean when I say (or see) God is "God as revealed in the Old and New Testaments". I can only speak for myself, when I am in public.



# **FOLLOWING JESUS**

Scott Alexander wrote “Meditations on Moloch”, which is about how systems become worse, but also more advanced.

Competitive people throw away what hinders competition, and so beauty is lost. But competitiveness itself becomes more excellent. He calls this “Moloch”, after the god of the Ammonites, to whom people sacrificed their children.

Jesus’ teachings, to me, appear to be an answer to the problem of Moloch. Alexander suggests that some kind of God is needed to govern systems, to keep competition from running over. But short of that, a human being could take the role.

Jesus taught people to be prudent, but also to trust God.

And he also told people to work hard, to be salt, light, and leaven. He was pushing people to use their talents, but he wasn’t pushing all people. He was pushing the people who were drawn to all-out trust in God, the ones who were still with him after he said his teachings about not worrying about tomorrow, and selling everything and giving to the poor and following him. He was making a people group, of talented people who didn’t think like ordinary talented people. He was causing them to succeed, but for different reasons.

If you look at the life of Jesus (and the death of Jesus) and you are drawn to living it yourself, it is likely because you

love beauty. You can die for beauty without fear of coercive power; you can be orthogonal to Moloch.

# ALTRUISM

Some people give 10% of their income to help cure diseases. A few give 90% of their income. Some people give of their income to help teach people about Jesus. Some people are paid this money and actually do the work, of curing and of teaching.

There is something beautiful in self-giving. It's like the beauty of singleness. You offer yourself, no more, no less. There's a humility in only living off what you need, and a humility in the generosity of giving everything else.

Evil says "wake up from your beautiful dream" and to deal with evil then becomes beautiful, because we forget beauty. Some people operate out of the sense that evil is real. Evil is so strong, it prevents epistemology. Perhaps these people are best suited for being altruists, out of anyone.

But altruism can be distorted by fear. An altruist, out of fear and drivenness, can burn him- or herself out. An altruist might even do something horrible, out of responsibility to "the greater good". Evil has a prestige which multiplies its power. That horrible thing might not have seemed unavoidable, if we weren't in a fearful context, or context-set. Some altruists make simple decisions, but some make difficult decisions.

Perhaps we can love out of beauty rather than out of fear, just as effectively as we would out of fear. I think this

requires that we encourage each other. Hebrews 10:24 suggests that we “stir each other up to love and good works”. I would take this in the direction of encouragement.

We could hold each other accountable or challenge each other, but I think this is not as beautiful. There’s fear in those. But, to each their own.

# THEISM

To love God is an altruistic act.

There are different meanings to the word “theism”. Usually it has meant “believing that a personal God exists”. There’s a philosophical term “classical theism”, which means “God exists and is omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent, and omnipresent.”

There’s a term “humanism”, which means something like “to love human beings because they suffer, to help human beings”. So another meaning of “theism” could be “to love God because he suffers, to help God.”

Here is something to think about, a story.

If reality is person-centric, that might mean that there is nothing except persons. A person is simply experience, which is a life-story or life-process. A person is simply experience drawn together in a single point of view.

Experience is simply communication. I communicate a little bit to myself, but mostly I communicate to God, by moving my fingers or legs (or sending thoughts through my brain), and God communicates back, by showing me the world, even my own body. What I say to you or anyone else, goes through God.

Any time I use my body in a way that is sin to God, I make God have to do something that is sin to him. There’s a lot of

cognitive dissonance, being God, maintaining a world in which people use it, the world, his body, in painful ways. We can violate God.

So God is under a lot of stress, and can be discouraged, weighed down.

What is the nature of God's power? It could be that he is able to speak to everyone, and can think very quickly, to think of the right things to say. This is why the sensed world can be so immediately persuasive. Perhaps God is infinite because he operates infinitely quickly. In that case, he can act on all other beings in a way that he has impressive power over them, but if his own thought process turns against him, as it can in depression or discouragement, then for him to operate infinitely quickly harms him all the faster. He could become so overwhelmed with discouragement that he might destroy the whole world and start all over. But he can manage this emotion by withdrawing from certain contexts, such as the contexts of paying attention to us in our personal realities of suffering and sin. Instead, he can numb himself as we do what we do with his body.

By disengaging with us, he allows evil into our personal lives. Because he can be stressed by evil, then Satan, who is a finite being (or a nation of beings), has leverage over him.

Because of this, God and Satan negotiate. Out of these negotiations come features of our reality that are hard to explain if a loving God exists, exactly to alienate some of us from God, and to cause us misery, which is to Satan a good in itself. But these negotiations allow God to do more good in the present than otherwise possible.

The sticking point is us, our hearts. When we come to be in tune with God, when we cease to be “strangers to God’s heart”, then Satan has lost. So he tries to keep us from doing that, so that we can continue to cause pain to God. As long as it’s possible for us to come into tune with God, it makes sense from God’s point of view to keep us alive. He can destroy the world (the outward appearances of things) and bring us all back to a new arrangement of things, but our hearts remain ours, and would begin to propagate new external problems in a new world.

However, though God can be discouraged and temporarily kept from doing what he wants, he can’t be killed, and as long as we are not hardened toward him, we can live.

In the meantime, there is a lot of unnecessary suffering.

For a few people, those who harden themselves against God, there waits hell, which is a finite suffering, and then they go to nothing. Hell, as a belief, and as a place, has its place. If we must fear, better to fear God than other things. But hell is heartbreaking, and the fear of God is not necessary, if we love God.

The story I’ve just told is ugly, in some ways, but evil is ugly and speaks against beauty. There is beauty in the ugliness. I don’t know if I believe this story I’ve told. Maybe it’s too new for me, or maybe my heart is not altruistic enough. It may be incompatible with the Bible. Jeremiah 32:27 says “Behold, I am the LORD, the God of all flesh. Is anything too

hard for me?"<sup>3</sup> -- which is a question that could be answered "yes", but which is in the form of a rhetorical question. Yet a limited God might be forced to maintain a terrifying, perfect image, even if in reality he couldn't do everything. Perhaps this is too ugly a thought.

We can love people, and God, as an image. We can extol them, speak well of them, find them exciting and appealing, think of how good they are, long to be with them, explain to everyone all their good points, never stop thinking or talking about them because of their good features, their natures.

We can also love people, and God, as people. I can be an artist's fan, but I probably can't help her if she's sick. Her husband can bring something to her in the hospital, and help pay her medical bills, and be present to her, but the most I can do is buy a copy of her album. I suppose I love her as a person if I do that, but it's nothing compared to her husband's love of her. And I might not buy her album, after all, though I could extol her and recommend her to anyone.

If we no longer love people as images, then how can we find whom to love? There's no reason to choose one person over another. Whatever might choose one person over another depends on their image, but we no longer look to image. So if we really love people as people, we love all people. If we love in this way, we love God and all people. And God loves all people. The God who makes us forsake all idols does not set up any of us as his.



There are limitations which force us to choose one person over another to help. For God, the only limitation is his own discouragement. So if we are demandingly loving of someone, we can pray, and if it was for someone for whom God could do something (in his wisdom and constraint), he can help that person. This is one way to help God, to be theists.

Another way to be a theist is to seek to do God's work. This helps us understand his point of view and have his heart.

Sometimes we have to do this in the half-atheism of prudence, where we have to manage resources as though God will not help us. Other times we have to rely on God to tell us what to do, because we need to come closer to him in that way. We have to learn to track God's reality, to be sensitive to him, but also to track the reality of people, to be sensitive to them.

God is described as "Father" in the Bible. When we were young, perhaps 5 years old, some of us may have thought that our fathers were terrifying, and knew everything, and could come in and out of our lives at their sovereign discretion. But then, 20 or 30 years later, we see our fathers much differently. Our fathers are not terrifying, we know they don't know everything, and we know that they are not sovereign. And yet we still love them, as though none of that really mattered. But now we are to an age to help our fathers in their good work, and to support them in their frailty -- just as we are frail. And in reality, we are at the age now to have five-year-old children of our own, and if we are men, to be their terrifying, all-knowing, sovereign fathers.

But we know that we are frail, and our fathers knew they were frail, when we were 5 years old.

God is less frail than us and less frail than our fathers, but is vastly more responsible and emotional.

This all, is this beautiful?

# ANIMALS

There is a kind of love that we have for persons which requires us to love animals. This has been my experience, at least. If we love animals, it teaches us a faculty of loving humans.

I think it is beautiful to believe that each animal is a personal being, just as I am a personal being and God is a personal being. We are each subjects, experiences drawn together in a distinct point of view. We not only feel, but can have a life as deep as the loneliest night. We can have preferences and a heart.

Animals look different than humans because God clothes them differently, speaks them differently. They behave differently because there is a veil over them.

Drunk people sometimes have a veil over them. What I mean is that they are themselves, but who they are doesn't come through, because of the alcohol. It comes through, but it doesn't. I don't drink, but this is what I've seen sometimes. I wonder if it feels that way to a drunk person?

I do have bipolar disorder, and I had a full-blown manic episode where I experienced what I guess could be called dissociation. I can remember being two different people. The orderlies were moving me from place to place in some kind of mental health facility, and I very calmly and without any malice, anger, or ill-intent felt like I should pick up the

oxygen tank which for some reason was with me. The orderlies said “He’s got the oxygen tank!” and moved to restrain me. Maybe I would have used it as a weapon on them, after all. But my conscious experience was not of that at all. On the inside I was my usual calm, mildly loving self.

I think that’s what it’s like to be an animal. Sometimes animals do very animal things. But they seem to have personalities, and I think that’s because they really are personal beings.

I don’t know if this applies to all animals, but it might. So I try to treat all animals as persons, or at least it is my goal to try to treat them all as persons.

I don’t know about plants (and fungi and single-celled organisms). That is a topic for another book.

So I want to not only anthropomorphize God but also “zoomorphize” God, and “theomorphize” humans and animals. We’re different, but we’re all personal beings. A slogan: “If humanism, then theism and zooism”. So there could be one term “personism”, to include all three.

# **CONCLUSION**

There is always more to say, but that is all.

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(the phrase "strangers to [a person's] heart", from

the "Theism" chapter, came from this.)

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(the book that made the Bible, taken literally, make sense to me)

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**Additionally,**

here are some things that I have found beautiful  
over and over:

*Blue Bell Knoll* by Cocteau Twins

*Loveless* by My Bloody Valentine

“Hymn of the Cherubim” by Tchaikovsky

Adowa music

Sacred Harp music

The ikons in the Timken Museum

Song of Solomon and Jeremiah

Oranges and mandarins, with a heartbreaking taste.

Maybe, you will find these beautiful as well.

<sup>1</sup> Genesis 32:22-32

<sup>2</sup> The Maasai, who consume less blood nowadays, but still consume some.

<sup>3</sup> English Standard Version